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241723Z Jul 03

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 004629

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/24/2013

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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS TO MOVE FORWARD JULY 26, DESPITE CRITICISM

REF: AMMAN 4189

Classified By: PolCouns Doug Silliman for reasons 1.5 (B)(D)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Despite a petition endorsed by the Islamic Action front (IAF) and its allies in the Lower House of Parliament to delay municipal elections and review the electoral laws, the government has decided to move forward with the process on Saturday, July 26. In Amman, low voter turn-out is expected and minimal enthusiasm is indicated by the dearth of campaign materials (i.e. posters, leaflets) in all districts. END SUMMARY.

LOCAL ELECTIONS GOING AHEAD

2. (U) PolCouns and Pol Intern met July 22 with Minister of Municipal and Rural Affairs Abdul Razzaq Tbeishat to discuss Jordan's municipal elections. A total of 1,643 candidates will run in 88 city, town, and village councils around the country. These numbers are down slightly from earlier estimates of 1,760 candidates in 99 municipalities. Members of the remaining 11 of the Kingdom's municipalities have already won uncontested, with the number of candidates equaling the number of seats. In a press conference on July 23, Tbeishat expected that more council seats will be won uncontested with the withdrawal of more candidates. Forty-six of the candidates are women.

MANY COUNCIL MEMBERS TO BE APPOINTED

3. (C) While 554 municipal council members are to be elected July 26, the government will appoint 441 others and all of the mayors (who will be chosen from either the elected or appointed council members). Tbeishat said that in each district in which no woman is elected, at least one woman will be appointed. (Comment: A visiting democracy promotion expert told Pol Intern that the appointment of women first took place in the 1999 municipal elections at the behest of Princess Basma, sister of the late King Hussein and aunt of the current monarch. End comment.)

4. (C) After the elections, Tbeishat explained that the government plans to see which strategic professions/areas of expertise are underrepresented in each council and appoint members accordingly. "If there's no engineer, we'll appoint an engineer. If there's no doctor, we'll appoint a doctor." Tbeishat also said that losing candidates would not be included in the appointee selection pool. The names of the appointed members will be announced by the Prime Ministry after the results of elected members are declared. Putting both appointed and elected members on municipal councils, Tbeishat said, is meant to improve the services provided to citizens. The GOJ is concerned that elected members will not have sufficient academic, professional, and technical backgrounds to execute their responsibilities skillfully. Tbeishat added rather defensively that the GOJ hoped to return to a system of elections for all municipal council seats "when we have achieved a good base of democracy."

ELECTION PROCEDURES

5. (U) In the 1999 municipal elections, voter turn-out exceeded one million. However, officials estimate participation this year will be a good 21 percent lower. One reasons, claims the government, is that voting rosters were cleaned, with duplicate names deleted. All citizens will be required to present their national ID card to cast a ballot. Polls will be open from 0700 until 1700, and, according to law, officials supervising the electoral process can extend voting by an extra four hours during the first day if less than 51 percent of eligible voters participate. If, after the four hour extension, voter turn-out does not exceed 51 percent, the elections can be extended for a second day

(Sunday) from 0700 until 1700. The results will then be finalized and officially announced, regardless of the number of voters participating.

16. (C) More than 3,000 employees of the Municipal Affairs and Interior Ministries will oversee the process, and the country's twelve governors will be responsible for the electoral process in their jurisdictions. As with the Parliamentary elections on June 17, a central operations room will be functioning at the Ministry to update journalists on developments. The only substantive difference between these elections and the Parliamentary elections appears to be the registration process. For the municipal elections, the GOJ appointed a committee in each municipality to produce a definitive list of residents of that community for the voter poll. It was through this process, Tbeishat explained, that "duplicate" names were removed.

COMMENT

17. (C) This will be Jordan's first municipal elections where half of all municipal council members are appointed by the government, as has long been the case in greater Amman. The change, introduced several months ago to the law governing municipalities, has drawn severe criticism from many parties -- particularly the IAF, which is boycotting all polls outside Amman. The IAF has publicly demanded popular selection of council members and mayors (see ref). The IAF's decision to run only in Amman may reflect an assessment of its comparative weakness outside the capital. Said Tbeishat, "What, there's only democracy in Amman and not in the villages?!"

8 (C) News of and material for upcoming municipal elections has been scarce in both Arabic and English, perhaps an indication of the public's general non-interest in this latest round of voting. The protest of some MPs against these elections will not strengthen the legitimacy of the elections in the minds of many voters.
HALE